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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the foundations and possibilities of service learning at the elementary education level. Teachers can utilize the tools of service learning to enrich their students' academic and personal lives, in addition to contributing to the community. Service learning is an approach to education in which students actually meet community needs and have a voice in the planning and execution of the project. This paper is divided into the following sections: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "So, What Is Service Learning?"; (3) "Why Should Students Participate in Service Learning?"; (4) "What Is a Framework of Service Learning?"; (5) "How Are Service Learning Projects Organized?"; (6) "Preparation"; (7) "Service"; (8) "Reflection (Before, During and After Service)"; and (9) "What Role Can Service Learning Play in Elementary Schools?" Contains 20 references. (EH)

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Service Learning in Elementary Schools

What? Why? How?

Brenna Fitzgerald
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Service Learning in Elementary Schools
What? Why? How?

Abstract *Service learning is an approach to education in which students actually meet community needs and have a real say in the planning and execution of the project. The components of service learning are preparation, action, and reflection. Reflective questioning should take place at each stage of the project to facilitate critical thought and growth in students. Establishing clear goals and utilizing thorough plans will help lead to an effective and lasting impact of the service for students and the community.*

> "This we know: All things are connected like the blood that unites us.
> We did not weave the web of life;
> We are merely a strand in it.
> Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves." Chief Seattle

Chief Seattle spoke these words over a century ago, prodding new Americans to care for all of the earth and its nature and creatures as his tribe had. He reminds us of the impact we have on our surroundings and the responsibility to care for them with kindness, preservation and justice. He calls us not only to care for the water, land and sky, but also to care and to be careful for plants, animals and each other. Stewardship, living with regard to the rights of others and other things, is an important quality to nurture and encourage in our students; it is a human quality that is taught and learned from direct experience.

So, what is service learning?

Connecting students with their communities is the primary goal and practice of service learning. Service learning "began as a way to provide young people with a sense of civic and social responsibility and support them in their growth and development" (Kinsley, 1995, p.1). Today, service projects have evolved to act as a bridge between curriculum and active, genuine community participation by utilizing dynamic teaching and learning methodology. "Service learning experiences connect students to their communities, enrich students' learning, and help

them develop personally, socially and academically. People (who live/work) in these communities believe that in performing service, youth learn to understand the meaning of community beyond self and develop a sense of responsibility and respect for others" (p.2). Children entering elementary school tend to be egocentric in their thoughts and actions; developmentally appropriate service learning projects provide opportunities for personal and social growth beyond the standard classroom walls.

In order to realize this growth, service learning projects require careful preparation well before, during, and after the project. After deciding your class would like to do a service project, the next step is choosing a project. Trecker (1960) found that good, worthwhile service projects meet the following criteria. Successful community projects (1) meet a real community need, (2) do not duplicate what someone else is doing, (3) make the best use of time and money being spent, (4) show regard for the dignity, pride and privacy of the person helped, and (5) are projects in which your class has a real interest (p. 26). Some groups may conduct a community needs study, contact a local social service agency, or brainstorm ideas in order to analyze options for service. "In fact, some of the best volunteering experiences have come about by youth identifying the social needs in their own communities and crafting a response to those needs" (Guidelines, 1995, p. 5). Other aspects of preparation include considering time (planning three months before the project), timing (judging what can be done within a block of time in the school day), and age-appropriate opportunities available locally. In addition to the practical details of the project, ample planning allows more thoughtful and meaningful preparation for the students. Then comes the actual service project, the "work" and "working with." Finally, and this part is what makes service projects *learning projects*, critical reflection takes place about the experience

in large or small groups, on the way home or back in school. Reflection deliberately reserves time for students to think and share about what they saw or did, how they felt about their work, why they think things are like that, what they have learned, and what they may do with this new knowledge.

Again, "service" means projects meeting needs of individuals, groups and communities through the integration of information, values and action. "Learning" refers to self-knowledge gained from the experience and about the project situation and the greater realm of the world (Trecker, p. 4). Turning to Bronfenbrenner's idea of the ecological approach to development (1979), the expanding realms of a child's world can be depicted with the image of a "set of Russian dolls" or concentric circles. At the inner circle is the child. The next realm contains the settings and people with whom the child has direct contact; it is the "proximal domain." These immediate elements are home, school, neighborhood, peer group, and church. Bronfenbrenner calls this circle the "microsystem" (p.7). Next, the "mesosystem" circle involves the same components as the microsystem. The child, however, realizes "the relations between events in different settings" and the possibilities of those relations, activities and roles (p.10). The next realm of factors that influence the child's development can be referred to as the "exosystem." These are "events occurring in settings in which the person is not even present"(p.3). Strategically, these settings are the parent's work place, school board, local government, local industry, and mass media. Finally, the "macrosystem" delineates all the other systems. The macrosystem is the dominant beliefs and ideologies of that culture (p.4).

Now, what does an ecological perspective of development do for service learning? It supports it. First of all, integral to the child in the microsystem are the "dyads" or "reciprocal relations"

(p.5). These are the crucial, shaping relationships of primary care givers such as parents, family members and teachers. These are the role-models. Further, the impact for developmental success of the child "is seen to depend on the existence and nature of social interconnection between settings including joint participation, communication, and the existence of information in each setting about the other" (p.6). For example, if parents and teachers have a line of communication and support, the child will benefit in school. Finally, in terms of direct contact and hands-on learning, "the environmental events that are the most immediate and potent in affecting a person's development are activities that are engaged in by others with that person in her presence" (p.6). Therefore, the ecological model defines the concentric realms of influences upon development, and it demonstrates the significance of interactions between the realms of our worlds and the components of those realms.

Elementary schools are integral parts of each neighborhood. Service learning strives to weave connections and build bonds between people for the benefit of the greater and smaller communities that exist. Further, to be mindful of all members of those communities, service experiences must be "mutually beneficial--both to those who serve and to those who are served" (Guidelines, p.1). This perspective significantly raises the level of care and respect in approaching service.

Why should students participate in service learning?

Although there are a million reasons to do service learning, answering this question requires some reflection. I can list all the benefits I have received from volunteering and ways in which I have noticed growth in my students from class service projects. I can also list convincing reasons to serve from my research sources. I will do both. Your own reasons to investigate and

plan service learning projects may end up being different. It is advantageous to consider possible benefits and potential goals for your students, for yourself as a teacher, and for your community. The point I want to make clear is that you need to "know before you volunteer *why* you are volunteering" (p.3).

Let's consider our students. First of all, service learning promotes respect for other people and living things. Students broaden their perspectives through the process of preparation, action and reflection; students transition to self-reflective perspective-taking, "step in another person's shoes." The ramifications of expanding one's perspectives include a sense of personal responsibility and sensitivity to others' situations and values. In fact, Nel Noddings (1984) takes this concept of stewardship a step further for educators and introduces "ethical caring" as arising out of natural caring, responding to love or natural inclination. Ethical caring is what we perceive as good, and perceiving ourselves this way motivates us to be moral. Noddings underscores the role of living and teaching ethical caring in moral education, "I shall claim that we are dependent on each other even in the quest for personal goodness. How good *I* can be is partly a function of how *you*--the other--receive and respond to me. Whatever virtue I exercise is completed, fulfilled, in you. The primary aim of all education must be nurturance of the ethical ideal"(p. 6). Students engaged in service learning can grow in care and respect by the very nature of authentic helping situations.

In planning service projects, I hope that my students grow in personal human qualities by getting to know themselves--their values, motivations, skills, interests, and work styles. In terms of values, students can be challenged to reflect on the importance of peace, beauty, equality, safety, friendship, excitement, recognition, freedom, and personal happiness. They can also

examine the components of achieving these goals, such as being ambitious, honest, proud, forgiving, polite, courageous, logical, and self-controlled. Again, service learning provides a real context in which to live and reflect on personal values. There are other significant values that can be developed and performed through projects. These are the ones I try to be conscious of : risk-taking, making healthy choices, taking initiative, concentrating on the task at hand, asking for help, handling consequences, and cooperatively problem-solving in a group. Students can make huge personal gains through service learning; your goals for your students and for the project determine those outcomes. Remember, although the intent is to provide a true service to the community, "as servers, we often get as much out of serving as we give--sometimes more" (Guidelines, p. 1).

In addition to developing relationships with people with different life experiences and developing healthy human qualities, service learning positively influences students' self-esteem. And this *the* key element. Students realize their ability to contribute. Students view themselves as resources with important skills and ideas to share. Students view themselves as people who can make a difference to another person, another tree, another park, another manatee. Students view themselves as valuable members of the human race because they *can contribute*. By meeting challenges and identifying individual and collective gifts, strengths and interests, service learning bestows the honor upon students to be the resource providers in their communities.

Kids are not the only ones profiting from service learning. Teachers benefit, too! It is an opportunity to challenge and stretch yourself as a teacher in several ways. You can take a creative and effective approach to your curriculum by coordinating it with service projects. You can incorporate literature, music, math, science, social studies, language arts, and your own

talents into service projects. You can build a bridge between your school and its community. Just as students learn to read by reading, students learn to participate by participating, to serve by serving, to contribute by contributing. Further, you will gain satisfaction from providing authentic learning experiences for your students. Your students can be engaged in the project, learning, and realizing they are learning. You can capitalize on "teachable moments" and raise student consciousness of perspectives and the impact of their work. Service learning also builds a class' group identity and creates an atmosphere of cooperation, democracy and respect if you and your students plan and carry it out cooperatively and respectfully. It is a lot of work on your part but well worth the effort in planning and executing a project of this caliber and importance.

There are, of course, eminent benefits of service learning to the community. Many center around the notion of reciprocity. When students become acquainted with the community and establish a role in it, those young citizens now have a vehicle and a voice to make improvements in those communities. In the past "close-knit neighborhoods and extended family living nearby...exposed youth to common opportunities to help others" (Junis, 1997, p. 29). In the next realm, church youth groups, Scouts and youth organizations, Key Club and service clubs have intentionally used service projects as central activities. But recently there has been a national push to extend service learning into schools. The National and Community Service Act of 1990 outlines these goals: to teach an ethic of service in our schools, to expand service opportunities for all citizens, to build on existing federal, state and local partnerships addressing community needs. Recently on a national level, the Summit for America's Future, held in Philadelphia in April, 1997, convened to discuss, share and plan ways to ensure that all children and youth have access to the fundamental resources they need. In addition, the Summit hoped to "organize ways

for citizens' groups, foundations, corporations and the Government to 'scale-up' and 'leverage-up' existing volunteer programs around the country" (Purdum, 1997). The vital resources the Summit believes the programs should address are (1) an ongoing relationship with a caring adult, (2) safe places and structured activities during non-school hours to learn and grow, (3) a healthy start and healthy future, (4) a marketable skill through effective education, and (5) an opportunity to give back to their communities through their own service (Corporation for National Service, 1997). Obviously, when the individuals of a community are healthy, competent and involved, the larger community benefits.

Thinking back on Chief Seattle's message, "Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves," elementary school students are ready and able to contribute to their communities and to reap the benefits of their investment. As the Corporation for National Service advocates, "young people need to be challenged, inspired and given opportunities to serve through their families, schools, communities of faith, youth service corps, and community organizations. Service experiences, in order to be of the highest quality, should be sustained over time, have identifiable results, help solve real community problems and be structured to include preparation, action and reflection"(1997).

What is a framework of service learning?

Student responses to service projects can produce a variety of ideas and possibilities for your class. The actual project will depend on the availability of time and resources in addition to age-appropriateness. The following grid is taken from *Guidelines* (p.6) in order to illustrate the scope and depth of possible projects.

"Addressing the Problem of Hunger"

	Education	**Service**	**Action**
Low	Study problem of world hunger	Organize a food drive in the parish	Join "Bread for the World"
Medium	Offer a seminar on hunger's resurgence in the U.S.	Set up a local food pantry	Lobby federal lawmakers to provide adequate funding for food programs
High	Research local food and nutritional needs	Help establish a soup kitchen in a place where it will the most people	Raise funds to support a self-help food project

The grid may be an effective brainstorming tool or a path of successive projects for your class. It is important to make large grid squares when brainstorming to invite several creative responses for each level before the class selects one.

How are service learning projects organized?

"Successful service learning opportunities are no accident. They are created by organized leaders who think through all aspects of the service experience from start to finish" (p.7). The whole project is composed of three phases: preparation, service, and reflection. The following

checklists will address each phase separately to focus attention to the details and concerns of each phase. As you prepare your own checklist in planning, it may be helpful to design colulmns next to the tasks for the target date, the date completed and then leave space for notes.

Preparation

After you and your students have chosen a service learning project, draft a project proposal plan. The proposal plan is a format to help you get organized and focus on your learning objectives.The following sample is adapted from Jasso (p. 114).

Service Learning Project Proposal

Project Name _____

Purpose of the Project
1._____
2._____
3._____

Additional Learning Objectives
1._____
2._____

Who will be served or what will be done
_____
_____

Name and address of service site
_____
_____

Contact person and phone number
_____

Date and times of project
_____

1.____ identify and be conscious of the faith-based/values-based reasons for this service project
2.____construct a time line (optimum three months in advance)
3.____establish clear and detailed job expectations with the service site, including exactly the work to be done, time frame of the day, materials available/ needed, student dress code, noise level
4.____gather and share information about the service site for students' background
5.____elicit student input and their predictions about the service project, discuss their definitions of "meaningful service", address fears and misconceptions about the project, discuss various gifts and strengths that each person brings to the experience including those served
6.____establish behavioral expectations and consequences with students
7.____provide sufficient staffing (1:3 for most positive and lasting experience), communicate your rationale and goals of the project to staff/chaperones
8.___make a detailed schedule of the day, be realistic about how much work is enough to remain meaningful and respectful
9.____list and gather all needed supplies
10.____complete budget
11.____do a pre-project visit to walk through the site and the project's activities, confirm resources, meet with service site contact

Service

1.____create an atmosphere of genuine respect, "do 'with', not 'for'"
2.____be openminded about who and what you encounter
3.____know your work limits and your students' work limits
4.____listen to understand the service situation and people
5.____stay relaxed
6.____ensure students are safe and enjoying themselves, and feel useful and appreciated
7.____be aware of problems that occur and assist in solving
8.____say "thank you" to the site contact and those served

Reflection

"One of the most common missing pieces in most service experiences is the processing that needs to occur right after the event" (Kinsley, p. 12).

1.____prepare chaperones to utilize the "ride or walk home" to process initial student reactions
2.____process the experience using a critical reflection model (below) in large or small groups
3.____prepare students for "re-entry" to balance enthusiasm with reality
4.____invite students to plan a celebration of the service project

Ultimately, a strong critical reflection model will help you and your students more thoroughly and effectively process all stages of the project in order to grow and learn from it. Kinsley developed a particularly creative and useful model through the image of a spiral (p. 104). The

spiral reminds us that reflection takes place throughout the project and that "students bring new competence to each successive experience" of the project cycle (p. 104). The following reflection questions from that model provide a framework to guide exploration and discussion with your students for each phase of service learning (adapted from Kinsley, pp. 105-112, and Guidelines, pp. 12-14).

Relfection Questions Before Service

- What do we wish were different in our community?
- What do we want to see happen?
- How do we feel about participating in this project?
- What do we expect to see and experience?
- What do we expect to get from this experience?
- What are our existing ideas about _____?

Reflection Questions During Service

- What do we notice about the area/the people?
- What are the highlights so far?
- What else does the service make us question?
- How are we problem solving?
- What is encouraging to us?
- How does this service make us feel?

Reflection Questions After Service

- What difference have we really made?
- What have I learned?
- Where might I apply this new knowledge in my life?
- How have my ideas about the world changed?
- What have I learned about myself and about those I served?
- What personal and academic skills have I developed?
- What values were expressed in this project?
- How did I feel?
- Why are things this way?

Reflection can take place in large or small groups, in order to allow for an adequate sharing of perspectives. Further, reflection does not only have to be discussion. You may consider making a mural, writing letters or books, webbing, creating a time line, or drawing pictures in order to

process the project with your students. The important thing is to help students raise their consciousness of what they are doing, experiencing, and learning at all phases of service learning.

What role can service learning play in elementary schools?

Service learning takes a natural place as a response to children's literature. The literature itself not only connects different areas of curriculum but provides valuable opportunities to examine role models and moral dilemmas in addition to simply enjoying the richness of books. "Children attend to many different things when reading or listening to a story. Some are entranced by the illustrations; others notice and relate to the characters; others may be reminded by the settings of experiences in their lives; and others are deeply involved in the plot" (Lamme, 1992, p. 12). Some stories lend themselves easily as inspiration for action. For example, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (Chief Seattle, 1991) may lead to cleaning up the local park, planting trees, or making Earth Day posters. After reading *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* (DiSalvo-Ryan, 1991), students may feel encouraged to learn about hunger and homelessness, or to collect food and clothes for the needy. *Swimmy* (Lionni, 1963) is a fantastic springboard for addressing group cooperation and teamwork to meet a goal or introducing cross-age/cross-grade study buddies. Another story that highlights the uniqueness of individuals while demonstrating cooperation is *Tacky the Penguin* (Lester, 1988). This story can be the foundation for discussions of personal values and convictions, or even raising interest in saving endangered animals. *Chicken Sunday* (Polacco, 1992) may inspire students to visit or work with the elderly, or to make their own gifts to give and sell at holidays. Finally, *A Chair for my Mother* (Williams, 1982) may empower students to collect money for the needy or to offer to take on

more responsibilities at home. Thus, quality literature provides a natural link between students' reactions to stories and what they do with all they have learned.

The epitome of hands-on learning, service learning, is a way to make education come alive for students by being action-oriented, strengthening content area skills, tapping into interests, challenging ideas and actions, and clarifying values. Also, service learning connects students to their community. It is important, however, to remember the difference between "community service" and "service learning." Community service *does* get students involved with their community. But service learning takes those actions further through the step of reflection. This step of thinking back over the service situation objectively and personally leads students to be analytical and creative and to grow. The cycle of reflection during the processes of planning, action, and reflection provide the catalyst to turn service into authentic learning experiences. It is our hope as teachers that the pattern of reflection will continue to spiral greater and greater for our students as they grow and learn and continue to branch out to others in the world. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (Margaret Mead).

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